

(Mount Clipping in Space Below)

He Had Hinted Break Interest To Interviewer

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By MARSHA VANDE BERG

James Earl Ray told me two weeks ago that "they wouldn't have me in a maximum security prison if I wasn't interested in getting out."

And the only question Ray refused to answer during an exclusive interview with him at Brushy Mountain State Prison was how he managed to escape from the Missouri State Penitentiary in 1967.

HE DID ADMIT that he had help from other prison inmates in that escape 10 years ago, and he denied he had help from any prison officials. But that was as far as he would go.

Last night, Ray escaped from Brushy Mountain, where he was serving a 99-year sentence for the 1968 slaying of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. At the time of the slaying, Ray was at large after that escape, from a 20-year sentence for armed robbery.

Prison officials were taken by surprise last night by Ray's escape with five other inmates, though Ray has made unsuccessful escape efforts at Brushy Mountain twice before. He bungled them, both in 1971 and 1972.

IN HIS 1971 effort, Ray used tools provided by another inmate, Roy Morelock, to scrape away cement from a concrete block in his cell wall. Removing that block and part of another, Ray crawled into an air chamber, ripped bars from a ventilation fan and escaped into the prison courtyard.

But there he tried to use the wrong concrete tunnel to crawl about 100 yards outside the prison walls. It was a steam tunnel, with a temperature of about 400 degrees Fahrenheit.

Ray suffered a few minor burns in the effort. He left his escape tools—a hammer, chisels and a crowbar—in the tunnel, backed out and

huddled in the courtyard trying to figure another way out. There he was found and surrounded by guards, who had been alerted by noise he made in the air chamber.

IN 1972, RAY tried to cut through the ceiling of a room adjoining the prison auditorium to the auditorium roof, and escape over the prison wall. Several other prisoners had succeeded in escaping by that route earlier.

Ray had obtained a hammer, a makeshift saw, rope, a block and bit and some plastic wood. They were thought to have been stolen from maintenance workers who had rebuilt a visiting area in the building not long before.

Ray had cut through the wooden ceiling of the room, apparently while movies were being shown in the darkened auditorium, and had used the plastic wood to put the cut board back into place and hide what he had been doing. He was captured while crawling back out of the room, apparently intending to attempt his escape later under cover of darkness.

HE HAS BEEN described as a "model prisoner" in recent months by prison officials, and Warden Stoney Lane said he voiced no objection to working with whites and blacks alike, side by side in the prison laundry. In his interview with me, Ray said he has no personal prejudice against blacks—but he added that he could not describe himself as a "humanitarian."

During that interview, arranged in the presence of Ray's present attorney, Jack Kershaw of Nashville, Ray

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talked about a lot of things in connection with the King case.

One of his major contentions was that he did not slay King, but that a mysterious Latin companion whom he knew only as "Raoul" may have shot the civil rights leader.

AT LENGTH, RAY told how his attorney, Percy Foreman of Texas, had "coerced" him into pleading guilty to the King slaying. He said he took Foreman's advice because Foreman told him of threats made to his family if he did not admit that he assassinated King.

He said, however, that he is "legally innocent" of the murder, although "I may be in some way partly responsible for it."

He said it was his responsibility to purchase the 30.06 Remington rifle which authorities believe was used to shoot King.

RAY SAID his first knowledge of King's death came in a radio broadcast over the radio in the car he was driving in the vicinity of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis where King was shot.

Ray said he sped away because he feared being arrested as an escaped convict.

During my interview with him, Ray sat at the corner of a long conference table. Kershaw was with him at the time. Ray was undemonstrative during most of the two-hour session. His hands were almost always folded across his lap as he talked, often in a high-pitched voice in broken sentences and using bad grammar.

HE SEEMED to have little sense of humor and his lawyer

later described him as being "often sardonic."

Despite the broken sentences and grammar, Ray appeared to be cunning.

At one point, Ray was asked about the palm and fingerprints—identified by the FBI as his—on the Remington rifle. His answer began in the first person as he described himself handling the gun, but then shifted to what criminals do to avoid tracing the weapon.

"MY FINGERPRINTS should have been all over it as much as I handled it," Ray said. But then he added:

"Usually whenever I'm doing anything—in the past like armed robbery, you usually put band aids over your fingers and that way you won't leave any prints." Ray, who often expressed himself in legalistic terms, seemed also to know the ways of the criminal underworld.

FOR EXAMPLE, he said his "professional relationship" with the mysterious "Raoul" was begun so Raoul could obtain "passports" for Ray. He wanted to leave the country so he did not have to go back to the Missouri penitentiary, he said.

"I could have gotten the passports myself," he added. He also described the ease with which he said he obtained a phony passport which he used to flee Canada for London after King was assassinated.

Ray, discussing his plans to escape this country, was explicit about where he wanted to live. He specified a country where English is spoken but rejected Mexico.

IN MEXICO, he said he would be associated with the lower classes and added that

that would be difficult to become "accustomed to."

Ray claims that that is the reason he did not stay in Mexico although he says he illegally carried packages across the border into Mexico as well as Canada.

The packages containing narcotics and other things were carried for Raoul, Ray claims. The mysterious figure, whom Ray describes as a Latin American who used the alias Raoul, gave Ray the money to buy the rifle, Ray claims.

"I'M 99% certain there's no one by that name," Ray said. "It's just an alias like the four or five aliases I was using."

Ray was arrested in London using the alias of George Ramon George Sneed. He used the alias John Willard to register at the Memphis boarding house from where King is believed to have been shot.

Ray was classified at Brushy Mountain after sentencing, but then transferred to Nashville after the prison in the desolate, unpopulated area around Petros was closed.

IN 1976, after the prison was reopened and at Ray's request, Ray was returned to the East Tennessee maximum security unit.

Guards at the prison have said it is impossible to escape from the Petros facility. There are only two ways out, they say.

One is across a mountain infested with rattlesnakes. The other is down a road leading past the prison warden's house and through Petros.

RAY, WHO appeared during the interview two weeks ago to be healthy, despite a prison pallor, apparently knew a way out last night, however.

But if he was plotting his escape two weeks ago, he gave no hint of his plans.

he was charged with the King murder but Ray was never again as talkative.

It seemed to me that he was always aware of precisely what he was saying. If he began to misspeak himself, he seemed to quickly gloss over any potential misstatements that would lead to what Ray considered false conclusions.

He seemed always to be wary, and always cunning.

Mickey McGuire, a former Tennessee state trooper, who accompanied Ray from Memphis to be imprisoned in Nashville in 1969, said the convicted killer talked freely about his escape after the murder of King and about his earlier escape from prison in Missouri.

"He talked about it a lot," McGuire said. "There were three of us in the car and he just talked about how he went to London after King was killed and how he was supposed to meet somebody and go to South Africa."

"LOOKS LIKE he might have headed for there again," he added.

McGuire said Ray told stories of how, when he was in the Missouri prison, he managed to be placed in the psychiatric ward of the institution because "the duty was better."

"He said he wasn't crazy. He was just getting out of work," McGuire said.

McGUIRE SAID he drove Ray several other times after

He also recalled going with then State Safety Department Commissioner Greg O'Rear to meet Ray when he was returned to Tennessee after being apprehended in London.

"We picked him up at the airbase in Millington, Tenn. and escorted him from there with the FBI, the Memphis chief of police and people from the sheriff's department," McGuire said. "The press had been told he would land at the Memphis airport so they were all there and we just took him to the county jail."



Mickey McGuire
Talked with Ray in '69

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